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One Hundred Years of Solitude: From Colombia to the World and Back

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The idea that I have turned my back on my country is utter nonsense. One thing is clear, and it is that wherever in the world I am writing a novel, I am writing a Colombian novel.[1]
—Gabriel García Márquez

[1] My translation. The interview is available on YouTube. See the list of references for the web address.

The above quote comes from an interview that Gabriel García Márquez gave in 1976 to Germán Castro Caycedo, a well-known Colombian journalist. The novelist was responding to people in Colombia who criticized him for not having lived or published in the country for years. A look at the circumstances that surrounded the conception, writing, and circulation of his best-known novel, *Cien años de soledad* (1967; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970), suggests a complex reality behind his response. García Márquez was born, grew up, and lived well into his early adulthood in Colombia. He published his first literary works and became well known as a reporter there. Before leaving for Europe in 1955, he was also deeply influenced by the cultural scene in both Barranquilla and Bogotá.[2] Most of his life after those formative years was spent elsewhere, particularly in Mexico, where he wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The success of the novel drew much scholarly attention to his work. International critics focused on its Latin American and worldwide relevance, often attaching

[2] Information about García Márquez's life comes from the biographies by Saldívar (1997) and Martin (2009).

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little significance to its national origin. As the quote makes clear, however, he explicitly identified himself as a writer of Colombian literature. For García Márquez, this identification was never incompatible with efforts to seek an international audience for his work.

The perception that he had "turned his back on" his country of birth may have been a consequence of his own desire to emphasize the Latin American and universal dimensions of his literature. Like other authors of the Latin American literary Boom, García Márquez aspired to move away from a focus on the national that had characterized previous generations of writers in the region. Still, he repeatedly stated that his writing drew heavily on his experiences growing up in Colombia. Over the years he also remained involved in his native country's cultural and political life. When the success of his novels allowed him to do so, he maintained houses in Bogotá and Cartagena, created and supported the Foundation for New Latin American Journalism [Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Latinoamericano] in Cartagena, helped launch the local political magazine *Alternativa*, and wrote many articles on issues relevant to Colombia.

Although García Márquez resisted the restrictive notion of a "national literature," he took up questions of critical national importance in his writing. Chief among them was the question of how to write about violence, a difficult reality that has afflicted Colombia for several decades. Efforts to address this reality in literature were central to García Márquez in his first works and left a mark on all his subsequent writings, particularly *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While the worldwide success of this novel later led to the promotion by others of a depoliticized version of the magical-realist label attached to it, its origins are deeply political. We might best understand García Márquez's most widely read novel to be the culmination of his efforts to both address the social and political conflicts of his own country and reach an international audience with his work. Balancing these often conflicting demands took him many years to work out.

One Hundred Years of Solitude was published in May 1967 in Argentina, and almost immediately attracted worldwide attention. The main Colombian newspapers, however, barely registered this success at first, and several months passed before the book reached local bookstores in Colombia. While this was in part the result of García Márquez's relative detachment from the national cultural scene at the time, it was also due to bureaucratic hassles in a country more preoccupied with the aftermath of an internal war than with ensuring expediency in the circulation of cultural production.[3] García Márquez published his first novels in the years after this war, known as La Violencia, which was sparked by the assassination of popular leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948. In 1957 an agreement between warring parties, called the Frente Nacional, ended the brutal confrontation, which had ravaged the country for almost a decade. Local debates about how to represent this violent period in literature deeply influenced his writing.

[3] A brief note in the "Cosas del día" section of the June 25, 1967 edition of *El Tiempo*, Colombia's main newspaper, mentioned that the import license for the novel was sitting unsigned in some public office. The

columnist complained that the lack of government interest in expediting the importation of books meant that Colombia might be the last Spanish speaking country to read a novel that promised to be among the greatest in Latin American literature.

The texts that the young author published during those formative years are an important part of the creative process that eventually led to the writing of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. They portray a writer deeply interested in finding the right way to narrate local stories of violence in his fiction, but also in reaching a world audience with it. The result was a smooth integration of local and transnational elements that is one of the most recognizable traits of García Márquez's literature. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for instance, he tells the specifically Colombian story of a civil-war torn country by focusing on several generations of one family, the Buendías, and their experiences of love, death, memory, and solitude—all themes of universal appeal—during those turbulent times.

García Márquez had been trying to write this novel for a number of years. According to the author a breakthrough happened in 1965, while he was driving with his family from Mexico City to Acapulco. The story has been retold many times of how at a certain point during that trip he saw clearly in his head the first line of the novel, canceled the family vacation, drove back home, and buried himself in his study for eighteen months to write it.[4] This account of the origins of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* places the emphasis on a moment of epiphany, something close to a magical revelation, as determinant in the creative process that led to the novel. Many, including the author himself, promoted the idea that as a result this book was a break with everything he had done in the past. In a well-known interview with his friend Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, he explained that in this novel he moved from a rational commitment to the social and political reality of Colombia, which was present in his earlier novels, to a more poetic and mythical engagement with what he called "the total reality of this world and the next" (56).[5]

[4] See, for instance, Apuleyo Mendoza (74), Martin (285), and Saldívar (430).

[5] This shift in focus has been linked to his contact with other Latin American writers in his travels, and in particular his encounter in Mexico with the work of Juan Rulfo.

A look at his earlier writings reveals, however, that underneath this shift lay a deeper continuity. Before publishing his masterpiece, García Márquez wrote three novels: *La hojarasca* (1955; *Leaf Storm*, 1972), *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (1961; *No One Writes to the Colonel*, 1968), and *La mala hora* (1962; *In Evil Hour*, 1979). When talking about precedents for *One Hundred Years*, most critics point to *Leaf Storm*, because it introduces places and characters that would later appear in the author's best-known novel. Among them is Macondo, the town in a banana enclave where *Leaf Storm* takes place, and the colonel Aureliano Buendía, who in this novel is mentioned a number of times, if only in passing. The links to *In Evil Hour* and *No One Writes to the Colonel* are less obvious and have therefore been less explored. These two novels are mostly seen as part of García Márquez's "realist" period, the only time when he directly addressed the horrors of La Violencia. As a result of the author's own declarations, most critics talk of this period as something that he left behind when he developed the magical realist approach to writing that would bring him fame with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. But some of the dilemmas that the author was confronting in these novels would return in *One*

Hundred Years of Solitude—in particular, those dealing with how to narrate violence and its effects on a society.

In Evil Hour was first published in 1962, but according to García Márquez's own account took many years to write. *No One Writes to the Colonel* started as a side story of *In Evil Hour* that took on a life of its own, and was first published in 1961. Both novels were written in a period when the author was first living in Paris, then traveling through Europe, and finally returning to Latin America in 1957. After a trip to Havana in 1959, he and Apuleyo Mendoza set up an office in Bogotá for the newly formed Cuban news agency Prensa Latina. This office became a magnet for left-leaning Colombian writers and intellectuals who at the time were engaged in a lively debate on how to write about the recent war. During this period, García Márquez published two articles on Colombian literature that were influenced by these debates. They also provide a window into his thinking about his own writing and how he perceived it in that context. These articles are "Dos o tres cosas sobre la novela de la violencia" [Two or Three Things on the Novels of La Violencia], published in October 1959, and "La literatura colombiana: un fraude a la nación" [Colombian Literature: A Fraud to the Nation], published shortly after, in April 1960.[6] How to represent violence in literature and how he viewed his work with regard to his country's literary corpus were two of the main topics of these pieces.[7] With their many comments on the craft of writing, they most likely made tacit reference not only to *In Evil Hour* and *Nobody Writes to the Colonel*, but also to a major novel he was working on at the time, called "La casa" [The House]. That project would eventually be abandoned, but served as the basis for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

[6] Both articles were published in Spanish, in a three-volume compilation of journalistic pieces by García Márquez, *Obra periodística* (1997).

[7] As I have shown elsewhere (Rueda 2011), the first article was in part responsible for the denomination of the group of novels that dealt with the Colombian civil war of the 1950s as "novelas de la violencia." It was part of a heated and consequential local debate about the merits of these novels.

Gabriel García Márquez, Office of Prensa Latina, Bogotá, 1959. Photo © Hernán Díaz. Photo courtesy Rafael Moure.

The first article was presented as a response to left-leaning colleagues who pressured him to write political literature. These were most likely the writers who gravitated around Prensa Latina and who in those years would be discussing the idea of the "escritor comprometido"—a writer who sees his work as engaged with a process of revolutionary change. The piece criticized all Colombian novels that, with an overt political intent, narrated events from La Violencia with morbid descriptions of crime and bloodshed in an effort to move readers. Questioning this approach, García Márquez suggested that the real drama of violence resides not in the killings and cruelty associated with it, but in their effects on those who survive. Stating in a rather categorical way that all Colombian novels which dealt with the war had failed to portray violence in an effective way, the author predicted that a future great novel about the drama of survival would inevitably appear. It is hard not to read this reference now as an announcement for the years-long project that eventually became *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The second article criticized the corpus of then-existing Colombian literature for not meeting the growing demand, among readers in the country, for good books. García Márquez argued that to satisfy this demand, Colombian writers should aspire to create literature with what he called "universal" value—which for him meant the ability to deserve "the attention of an international public."[8] The idea of responding to the expectations of a national readership with a literature that can be of interest to audiences anywhere in the world may sound paradoxical, but makes sense in his historical context. Throughout Latin America there was at the time a shift of focus in cultural production, from an interest in national culture to a more cosmopolitan vision.[9]

García Márquez argued that Colombian writers had hitherto not had worldwide appeal because, in his words, those writers "lacked an authentic sense of the national, which was without a doubt a condition to assure that their work would have universal projection."[10] This authentic sense of the national, he maintained, had to be grounded in what he termed "a national drama." Looking historically, he saw La Violencia as the first and only national drama which had produced a body of literature. The problem, as he saw it, was that the craft of literary writing in Colombia was at that time still not developed enough to produce works of "universal" value on the subject. Once again, we might speculate as to whether this hints at his own literary attempt to capture this national drama in a way that could be read anywhere in the world.

The novel in which he most directly looked at La Violencia is *In Evil Hour*. Its realist, almost cinematic style differs markedly from the magical realism of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Nonetheless, the earlier novel foreshadows his later treatment of violence with its focus on the drama of survival. This drama is expressed, for instance, in the description of how people who are killed in communities wracked by violence

[8] My translation (577).

[9] For more on the cosmopolitan reach of García Márquez and his literature, see Siskind (59-100). For a discussion on the meanings of the word "universal" at the time of the Latin American literary Boom, see Franco (21-117).

[10] My translation (578).

maintain a presence among those who survive. Although the murdered never come back to chat with the living in *In Evil Hour* or *No One Writes to the Colonel,* as they do in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the fatal victims of violence are still a haunting presence in the lives of the earlier novels' characters.

The narrative of *In Evil Hour* takes place in a town that has been "pacified" by violent means. It is now governed by a corrupt mayor, who belongs to the party responsible for much of the killing. At one point, the mayor compels a woman to serve him a bowl of soup. She complies, but tells him: "May God give you indigestion" (67). When the mayor asks how much longer townspeople like her will maintain that defiant attitude, she responds: "Until you people bring back to life the dead that you killed" (67). Her comeback effectively tells him that the people they tried to eliminate through violence will never be gone. They remain ever-present, not as ghosts who interact with the living, but as spectral forces that sustain the defiance of survivors. Such forces inspire multiple acts of rebelliousness that the townspeople enact against those in power. These include posting anonymous lampoons on people's doors, an act that serves as the basis of the novel's plot and that eventually leads to a revolution in the town.

The lingering presence among the living of people killed by violence is also a source of resistance in *No One Writes to the Colonel*. Agustín, the son of the titular colonel, who was murdered while distributing clandestine political leaflets, is referred to as someone who is still around and sustaining forces of rebellion. His former comrades are now leaders of the resistance, and every time they release a clandestine news bulletin they announce it to others by saying "Agustín wrote" (35). When the colonel hears that sentence, he asks: "What does he say?" (35), inquiring about the contents of the bulletin with a present tense that may confuse readers who are aware that Agustín is no longer alive. This realist way of talking about the dead conveys the idea that resistance is sustained by the memory of those who have been killed.

With the move to a more mythical approach to reality in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the dead become actual ghosts who remain among the living, playing some of the most crucial roles of the novel. For instance, the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, whose murder had led to the foundation of Macondo, reappears throughout the story to remind the Buendía family of their violent origins. Another example can be seen in how García Márquez treated the massacre of banana workers. The event described in the novel is based on a real incident that took place in December 1928. It is perhaps the best-known episode in the novel, signaling the downfall of Macondo. While the massacre itself is conveyed in a realistic, straightforward way, reminiscent of García Márquez's earlier novels, its aftermath is full of magic and ghostly presences. There is a phantasmagoric train full of dead victims of the massacre and a long-lasting deluge that

comes close to destroying the town. There is also a survivor, one of the Buendías, who tells his nephew about the massacre to make sure that the carnage is not forgotten. This nephew, the last in the family line, will be in charge of deciphering manuscripts that contain, we find out later, the story that we are reading. As he reads the manuscript pages, they disappear in a fatal wind engulfing the town. But we the readers know that the tale was not lost because it is contained in the book that we are holding.

The novel is the ultimate survivor of a violent history. It is an act of resilience, attesting to a past full of conflict and killing, now contained in the body of the book. Its magical realism makes manifest the lasting presence of this painful past in the memory of those who survive. That traumatic dimension of the novel is obscured in the appropriation by others of García Márquez's work for the depoliticized promotion of magical realism. Understanding the localized challenges that the author was responding to gives us a richer perspective on its meaning. When we look at the origins of the Buendía family saga, we see a complex reality surrounding the antecedents of its conception. We see a nation struggling to make sense of its violent past and a writer striving to find the right tone to narrate this past to both his compatriots and the world.

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